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**MEDAN CHINESE AND THEIR STIGMA:
GRABBING POWER IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY¹**

Zeffry Alkatiri

Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia
Zeffry_al@yahoo.com

Adrianus L. G. Waworuntu

Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia
Adrianus.laurens@ui.ac.id

Fuad Gani

Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia
Bangfu.08@gmail.com

Reynaldo de Archellie

Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia
Archellie@gmail.com

Abstract

This article presents the result of a pilot project which seeks to examine the pattern of socio-cultural interaction between the Chinese people and other ethnic groups in the multicultural City of Medan, North Sumatra. The purpose of this article is to examine various obstacles in the pattern of socio-cultural interaction among those two groups of people. This article utilizes both field data and the data obtained from bibliographical references. This qualitative research applies the ethnographical approach and is conducted by observing various activities and behaviors that arise from the pattern of socio-cultural interaction between the Chinese people and other ethnic groups in Medan. From this project, we draw a preliminary conclusion that the Medanese Chinese have established domination over numerous areas of life in Medan by engaging in various socio-cultural activities, both conspicuously and inconspicuously. Such hegemonic tendencies have contributed to creating a negative perception of the Medanese Chinese among other members of the plural society in Medan. In addition to that, the difficulty of Medanese Chinese to assimilate themselves with the local populace only increases the social gap between them and other local communities. These factors constitute challenges for the Medanese Chinese to interact with people from other ethnic groups.

Keywords: Interaction Pattern, Medanese Chinese, and Power Domination

¹ President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono issued Presidential Decree no 12 year 2014 on the Withdrawal of Presidential Circular of Ampera Cabinet no SE-06/Pred.Kab/6/1967 dated 28 June 1967. This decree changes the term "Chinese" into "Tionghoa"; and China (RRC) into Tiongkok. However, in this article we still use the term "Chinese" rather than "Tionghoa". It is not supposed to be unfair or against the decree, but based on the discipline of study.

Introduction

In a pluralism country like Indonesia, the concept of integration has become a complex and crucial issue, as well as a major focus in the process of developing unified and plural Indonesian society. Ever since its independence in 1945, Indonesia has not been able to solve a number of problems with regard to the process of integration. One of such problems concerns the minority groups, especially the local Chinese people, whose religion and culture are generally different from those of other local majority ethnic groups. This problem eventually leads to political instability during the presidencies of Soekarno and Soeharto and even up to this present day, and this has also posed a great challenge for the government in achieving a national integrity in a country so marked with pluralism.

Indonesia's effort towards integration is frequently marred by deep-rooted internal clashes due to considerable differences in ideology, ethnicity, religion, and myriad conflicts of interests, which have not been entirely resolved from the days of the country's inception to this present day. Seen from this perspective, it is obvious that the "Chinese problem" itself is intertwined with more complex issues, ranging from various economic, social, and political situations to relationship with foreign countries (Suryadinata, 2002:18).

A similar viewpoint is also proposed by T. K. Oomen in his book, *Kewarganegaraan, Kebangsaan, dan Etnisitas (Citizenship, Nationality, and Ethnicity)* (2009). This book discusses the problem of identity and nationality among minority groups. This book also theoretically questions the meanings of identity, nationality, and ethnicity in the context of a unified nation. It has been frequently pointed out that such notions have become a latent source of frictions and conflicts which may impede the integration process of a country, and the same phenomenon also happens in Indonesia with its plural and multicultural society.

The Chinese people have long taken residence in various areas throughout the Indonesian archipelago, including the Province of North Sumatra, especially the City of Medan. Most of them worked as merchants and workers. During the Dutch colonial era, they enjoyed more privilege than the indigenous or local people did. The opposite took place during the post-independence era until the New Order era, when their existence was politically suppressed. However, upon entering the Reform era, the Chinese Indonesians regained much of their freedom following the overturn of various New Order policies and cultural suppressions; they have ever since been granted an equal standing with their other fellow countrymen. However, a quite different situation can be found in Manado. A previous study which examines the pattern of socio-cultural interaction between the Chinese people and other local ethnic groups in the City of Manado (the Province of North Celebes) demonstrates that the Chinese people there have never encountered any significant challenges in establishing interactions with their fellow countrymen (Waworuntu, et al., 2017).

In Medan, the number of Chinese quarters or *kampongs* is more than those of other ethnic groups. Some areas in Medan City are known as Chinese *kampongs*, such as Kampung Baru, Kesawan and Pasar Ikan, Glugur, Pulo Brayan, Labuhan, Belawan, Titipapan, and Sunggal. In such areas, the Chinese settlements grow rapidly (Hamdani, 2012: 96). However, the current expansion rate of Chinese economy has forced them to spread to other areas around Medan. It can even be said that the Chinese have actually dominated not only the central part of Medan, but also its surrounding areas.

The integration and assimilation of the Chinese people with indigenous cultures

throughout Indonesia have been the subjects of numerous books and articles. Most authors are concerned with the kinds of factors which have hindered the integration process of the Chinese people with the local people. One prominent factor is a significant difference in the matters of faith or religion. Besides that, there is also a significant gap in terms of income, which has become one of the most potent and most prevailing sources of social envy towards the Chinese people. As a comparison, we shall present a number of previous studies which deal with the issue of interaction between the Chinese people as a minority group and indigenous peoples as majority groups in several cities in Indonesia.

Zeffry Alkatiri and Fabianus Koesoemadinata (2012) found an interesting pattern of interaction between two groups of people who have different faiths but are still able to establish a positive interaction through socio-cultural media. One interesting example is the Lion Dance (*Barongsai*) performance in Slawi City, Central Java Province, which has become an effective medium of interaction and assimilation between the local Chinese people and the indigenous people there. Many indigenous people even take part in the Lion Dance performance as dancers. This fact demonstrates that a Chinese ritual can serve as a medium of interaction between people, in spite of religious and cultural differences.

There have also been several serious conflicts arising from the unhealthy interaction between the Chinese people and the local people, as mentioned by Ahmad Habib (2009), such as the one which took place in a village in East Java Province. The clash ensued because the indigenous people there considered that the local Chinese did not understand local values and behaved arrogantly. From the perspective of the indigenous villagers, the Chinese, who were considered as newcomers, should have understood and obeyed both formal and informal laws already prevailing in their village. Such condition created a protracted conflict in the village.

In Indonesia, the Chinese problem has always been more prominent than that of any other ethnic groups. This observation is pointed out by Wibowo (2001) in his book which shows that the Chinese Indonesians have always engaged in a constant struggle for identity as both Chinese and Indonesians, an aspiration which has long been repressed and remained unexpressed. The social and political condition of the Chinese Indonesians was also chosen by Benny Setiono as the topic for his book *Cina dalam Pusaran Politik: Mengungkap Fakta Sejarah Tersembunyi Orang Cina di Indonesia* (*The Chinese in Political Turmoil: Uncovering the Historical Facts of the Chinese People in Indonesia*) (2008). Another work which deals with the notion of Chinese people as a problem within the Indonesian society was written by Choirul Mahfud (2013), who examines in a comprehensive manner the situation of the Chinese people in Indonesia, along with its dynamics and complexity.

The introduction of the political dichotomy between indigenous (*pribumi*) and non-indigenous (*non-pribumi*) people during the New Order era actually arose from various instances of negative interaction between the “insiders” and the “outsiders,” which is strongly related to the issues of migration, regional control, economic resources, and job distribution. In the Indonesian context, economic factors play a greater role in creating socio-cultural frictions between the Chinese people and the other ethnic groups than political factors or any other factors do. The Chinese people are generally considered as more economically successful and influential than most other ethnic groups in Indonesia. Such situation creates both social and economic gaps which trigger resentment among the indigenous populace and give rise to anti-Chinese movements and attitudes which arise from the politically-motivated perception of the Chinese Indonesians as non-indigenous citizens. This situation also leads to

various forms of segregation and disintegration, a factual and most telling example of which is described and discussed in detail by M. D. La Ode in his book, *Etnis Cina Indonesia dalam Politik: Politik Etnis Cina Pontianak dan Singkawang di Era Reformasi 1998-2008* (Chinese Indonesians Ethnic Group in Politics: The Politics of Chinese People in Pontianak and Singkawang during the Reform Era 1998-2008) (2010).

This extensive literature review thus shows that studies of the Chinese people in various cities and regions in Indonesia are quite numerous, but studies of the Chinese people in *Medan City* are still rare, especially the ones which deal with the situation and condition of the Medanese Chinese during the Reform era. In their studies, Hamdani (2012) and Basarshah (2013) found that, throughout history, the Medanese Chinese have undergone a long process of integration with the indigenous people in order to avoid conflicts with their local countrymen, but this effort has so far always ended in failure. Several factors contribute to this failure: (1) historical background, (2) great difference in terms of tradition and culture, and (3) perceived dominance of one ethnic group over trade and economic resources. Another research argues that the construction of Chinese identity is largely influenced by the policies of the ruling regime or the power of the majority groups in a particular region (Dawis, 2010: 38). In other words, specific conditions of a particular region also affect and determine the success of the assimilation process of the Chinese Indonesians.

In view of those phenomena, this present article seeks to observe and discover the pattern of interaction between the Chinese people and the other ethnic groups in Medan by asking these two main questions: (1) when and how did such pattern of socio-cultural interaction emerge and develop? and (2) what are the obstacles to establishing a positive interaction between the Chinese people and the other ethnic groups in Medan? The purpose of this article is to examine the pattern of socio-cultural interaction between the Chinese people and the other ethnic groups in the context of the plural and multicultural society of Medan City. The City of Medan is chosen because of several reasons. History tells us much about the migration of the Chinese people to Medan City, which took place in several major waves. In spite of the fact that Medan City was mostly inhabited by the Malays, it was also inhabited by people from various other indigenous ethnic groups, such as the Batakese, Padangnese, Javanese, and Acehese, as well as other migrant groups from India and Pakistan. Their arrivals have contributed to the ethnic diversity and plurality of Medan, a condition which is quite different from Semarang (according to 2013 research) or Manado (according to 2014 and 2017 research).

This qualitative research was conducted in several steps. Firstly, we gathered data both from bibliographical references and from our field study in the forms of FGD (Focus Group Discussions) and interviews. Secondly, we selected the data that are relevant to our research purposes. Thirdly, we analyzed the data by utilizing the ethnographic approach and theoretical framework related to the concept of social interaction.

Theoretically, there are some factors constituting the process of social interaction, such as (1) inter-individual relationship laden with certain interests and purposes; (2) frictions during the interactional process; (3) the need for a particular place or association to gather when the interaction becomes more established; and (4) an individual or collective awareness which serves as the basis for interactional purposes (Thohir, 2007: 2-4). With regard to these factors, we would like to find out whether the Medanese Chinese can be considered to engage in meaningful actions or meaningless actions.

Based on the results of Bruner research (1969) identifies three factors which can make an ethnic group more powerful than others in Indonesian context: (1) demographical factor, (2) political factor, and (3) local cultural factor (Bruner in Pelly, 2015: 35). However, based on our data concerning the general population of Medan City, we found that there is no single ethnic group or community which can be said to have the dominant power over others. As a consequence, all ethnic groups are competing with each other in various areas of life. Such condition holds a great potential for instigating social frictions among different ethnic groups both at present and in the future.

According to Suparlan (2006), the status of Chinese Indonesians as “foreigners” or “outsiders” was preserved and reinforced during the New Order government. In spite of being full citizens of Indonesia, the Chinese Indonesians were still stigmatized as “foreigners” and frequently became victims of discriminatory acts and extortions by government officials and military officers, with an exception of a number of Chinese who were lucky enough to own large banks or to hold the positions as heads of companies patronized by influential government officials or military officers. The same phenomenon also prevails in Medan, both during the New Order era and afterwards, both conspicuously and inconspicuously. Based on our observation of this phenomenon and equipped with the theoretical concepts as expounded above, we decided to carry out this research in order to find out and to gain insights into the inner thoughts and desires of people, both as individuals and as a group, who live and thrive in an urban setting (Medan City) with its problems and complexity, especially the ones which are related to the social interaction between the Chinese people and the other ethnic groups in Medan.

The novelty of this research lies in the fact that significant differences in terms of historical background, income, socio-cultural patterns, faiths, foods, and physical appearances between the Chinese people and the other ethnic groups in Medan are still prominent and that such differences still present considerable obstacles to any effort to build a healthier pattern of relationship between both groups.

Historical Background: from the Early to the Present

History records that the Chinese people migrated to Medan in three great waves. The first wave took place approximately in the fifteenth century. These first-wave migrants were relatively few in number and consisted of merchants who sailed to East Sumatran harbors for the purpose of trade. The second wave took place approximately in the mid- and late nineteenth century as a response to the growth and development of Dutch tobacco plantations and industry in Deli area, now North Sumatra Province, which required a large number of workers. Most of these second-wave Chinese migrants came from the southern part of Fujian and Guangdong Provinces in mainland China. The third wave took place in early twentieth century, and most of these Chinese migrants worked as coolies, free workers, or tradesmen.²

²The Chinese's social mobility can be divided into two broad categories: the former Chinese coolies and the free Chinese. The free Chinese were Chinese migrants who were never involved in the colonial plantation system. They came as individual migrants or in small groups. These two groups differ in many respects, especially their forms of achievements and patterns of mobility. On the one hand, the former Chinese coolies took a much longer time to free themselves from any bonds with the colonial plantation system. On the other hand, the free Chinese workers raised their social status much more quickly than those working in the colonial plantations did because most of them worked as tradesmen (Hamdani, 2012:47).

At first, all Chinese in Medan consisted of the *Totok* or “Foreign-born” Chinese. This signifies that they still maintained the traditions and customs of their respective hometowns or provinces in mainland China. However, as they were gradually immersed in and mixed with the indigenous people, these Chinese came to be known as the *Peranakan* or “Local-born” Chinese. This signifies that they adopted various elements of indigenous cultures while still maintaining many elements of their own culture. Some of them even intermarried with the indigenous people.

The Dutch colonial government categorized the *Peranakan* Chinese and *Totok* Chinese as part of *Vreemde Oosterlingen*, a broad group of people who came from Eastern Oriental countries (Greif, 1991: xi). They occupied a higher social stratum than the indigenous people of Indonesia did. Such division was enforced by the Dutch government in order to prevent the union between the Chinese people and the indigenous people, because such union would give them enough power to challenge the Dutch hegemony in Indonesia (Suryadinata, 2002: 8). This segregation was also part of the Dutch government’s effort to stir up hatred among the indigenous people towards the Chinese people. Another such effort was to grant certain privileges to the Chinese people, such as education and opportunities to become Dutch citizens. Another benefit enjoyed by the Chinese, especially the *Peranakan* Chinese, was the opportunity to work for the Dutch government and businessmen as middlemen because some of them were fluent in both Dutch and local languages.

During the 1910s the City of Medan became their settlement. Even though their living quarters were restricted by the Dutch colonial government, the Chinese eventually spread to various places in Medan City. In order to exert its influence over the whole Chinese community, the Dutch government appointed Chinese leaders (with the ranks of captains, lieutenants, mayors, etc.) as the government’s representatives at various levels of the community; one of the most popular Chinese leaders at that time was Chong A Fie.³

Now firmly settled in Medan, the Chinese began to establish various benevolent associations based on their respective backgrounds. These Chinese associations were usually aimed to provide assistance for Chinese merchants who suffer financial difficulties, to act as a mediator in disputes among its members, to provide supports for workers, to distribute donations to poor Chinese, and so on. Such associations can be divided into four categories based on certain types of backgrounds: (1) professional or skill-based, (2) ethnicity- or hometown-based associations, (3) family associations, and (4) cooperative associations or *kongsis*. In addition to that, there were also associations established to operate schools and mortuaries. In 1920s, there were sixteen Chinese professional associations and twelve hometown-based associations in Medan. Each association had its own rules and regulations, prominent figureheads, meeting schedules, and administrative buildings, as well as exclusive temples and patron gods or goddesses. By 1930 Chinese companies had dominated marine transportation and the distribution of local products down to the smallest stalls in remote villages.

³Chong A Fie, a renowned Chinese Mayor in Deli, and his older brother Chong Yong Hian belonged to the Hakka ethnic group and members of the free Chinese settlers. Before the Indonesian independence in 1945, Chong A Fie and several other wealthy Chinese merchants in Medan had occupied positions in the city council and the cultural council. They also dominated the areas of wholesale trade, crops trade, export and import business, banking, printing, and newspapers. Chinese control over those areas of business transformed them into a new class of “trade bourgeoisie” who are unrivalled in terms of business skills (Hamdani, 2012: 74), even until this present day.

During the Dutch occupation of Indonesia after the Second World War (1945-1949), many Chinese reported to the commander of the Allied forces in Medan that their stores and shops had been looted and that many Chinese had been killed by a youth militia. Because of these atrocities, they appealed for the protection of the Allied forces. In response to this request, the English General Ted Kelly formed a Chinese militia called *Poh An Tui*. The presence of this militia sparked further social envy and suspicion among other local people, leading them to question the loyalty of the Chinese people towards the Indonesian Republic. Such suspicion remains even to this present day (Basarshah, 2013: 24).

During the independence era, President Soekarno and Vice President Hatta doubted the loyalty of the Chinese people towards the Republic of Indonesia (Suryadinata, 1978: 25-33). As a result, the Indonesian government issued a set of policies promoting the integration or assimilation of the Chinese Indonesians into local Indonesian culture (Greif, 1991: xii-xiii). For example, in 16 November 1959 Soekarno issued the Presidential Decree Number 10 of 1959 which forbade the Chinese merchants to operate business outside the capital cities of level I and level II autonomous regions (*daerah swatantra*) or residences (*karesidenan*). This policy was followed by the Government Regulation Number 20 of 1959 on the Implementing Regulations of Dual Nationality Treaty with the People's Republic of China which became effective on 20 January 1960. During this time, a number of districts and villages in Indonesia used the Government Regulation Number 10 of 1959 as an excuse to expel their Chinese residents from their territories.

The issue of Chinese existence in Indonesia was made even more prominent when the New Order regime came to power. During that era, a set of policies were issued for the purpose of suppressing the Chinese existence in Indonesia. The first was the Cabinet Presidium Decision Number 127/U/Kep/12/1966 which required the Chinese Indonesians to change their Chinese names into Indonesian-sounding names. Most Chinese at that time decided to change their names, but they in fact still used their original Chinese names on a daily basis (Greif, 1991: xvii). The second was the Presidential Instruction Number 14 of 1967 on Chinese Religion, Beliefs, and Traditions which forbade the display of Chinese celebrations, the use of Chinese language, and the practice of Chinese traditions in public, which included Confucianism. The third was the Circular Letter Number SE.02/SE Ditjen/PPG/K/1968 which forbade the printing and publication of any materials or advertisements written in Chinese characters for public consumption. The fourth was the Regulation of the Minister of Housing Number 455.2-360/1988 which forbade the use of lands for building, expanding, or renovating Chinese temples. The fifth was the Presidential Regulation Number 240 of April 1967 on the principal policies concerning Indonesian Citizens of Foreign Descent (Greif, 1991: xx).

Besides that, the Soeharto government sought to assimilate the Chinese community into the non-Chinese community by issuing the Presidential Decree Number 14A of 1980. This Decree required all government institutions and ministries to give priority to the indigenous (that is, non-Chinese citizens) entrepreneurs. It also demanded cooperation between indigenous and non-indigenous entrepreneurs. The realization of this Decree came to be known as the *Cukong* system, which is a form of joint venture between Chinese and indigenous businessmen. In this system, the indigenous party is obliged to obtain and provide the necessary licenses and facilities, whereas the Chinese party is obliged to invest a capital for the business and to operate it (Suryadinata, 2002: 91). However, in practice, such system both directly and indirectly strengthened and solidified the already powerful economic

position of the Chinese party, which further separated them from the rest of the society. Besides policies on economic matters, the government also issued a social policy concerning the issuance of the Indonesian Resident Identity Card (*Kartu Tanda Penduduk* or KTP). The Chinese Indonesians were given special digits on their Resident ID Cards, which were different from non-Chinese residents. Actually, this action was carried out for the purpose of identifying and controlling the Chinese people in Indonesia (Suryadinata, 2002: 98).

However, with the coming of the Reform era, the Chinese Indonesians finally regained their former freedom, thanks to the enactment of several policies by the new government. The first was B. J. Habibie's Presidential Instruction on the abolition of the terminological dichotomy between indigenous and non-indigenous people. In addition to that, President B. J. Habibie also issued the Presidential Instruction Number 4 of 1999 which abolished the requirement of having a Proof of Citizenship of the Republic of Indonesia (*Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia* or SBKRI) and removed the ban on Chinese language teaching and learning activities. The second was Abdurrahman Wahid's famous Presidential Decree Number 6 of 2000 which effectively revoked Soeharto's Presidential Instruction Number 14 of 1967 on Chinese Religion, Beliefs, and Traditions. The third was Megawati's Presidential Decree Number 19 of 2002 which declared the Chinese New Year as one of national public holidays. The fourth was the introduction of Law Number 12 of 2006 on Citizenship by the Indonesian People's Representative Council on 11 July 2006. By enacting this Law, the government sought to eliminate all discriminatory and racist policies and laws prevailing in the previous era.

After a long process of history, the existence of the Chinese Indonesians is finally recognized both at local and at national levels. To become "full Indonesians", the Chinese people throughout Indonesia had to deal with various obstacles and even conflicts with other local ethnic groups in many areas of life. The same also holds true for the Medanese Chinese. Even after the independence of Indonesia, they still experienced alienation and discrimination because of their history, culture, and faith which were considered to be very different from those of the indigenous people. The condition, it pushes them to develop the necessary strength, diligence, resilience, determination, and ability to compete with both the indigenous people and other migrants in Medan City.

By examining their history, we can conclude that the Medanese Chinese are an ethnic group which has experienced a long period of occupational transformation from coolies to merchants, blacksmiths, carpenters, cooks, or middlemen. Their strong characters were progressively built through various hardships and harsh living conditions in Deli plantations, as well as elsewhere, and this mentality is reflected in their behaviors and actions which might be considered unacceptable or even "immoral" by other ethnic groups. Such stigmas are reflected in certain expressions and terms coined by members of other ethnic groups to refer to the Chinese People, some of which survive to this present day (Hamdani, 2012: 6).⁴

⁴One of such derogatory expressions referring to the Medanese Chinese was *Cina kebon sayur* or "vegetable garden Chinese." This particular expression referred to those Chinese who had completed their contract terms in plantations and proceeded to work as farmers. They were associated with poverty. Other expressions were *Cina goni botot* (literally means "Chinese with sacks (for carrying) second-hands") which referred to those Chinese who worked as second-hand dealers and *Cina kebakaran jenggot* (literally means "Chinese whose beard is on fire") which referred to those Chinese who were stricken by calamity (*sic*). See Hamdani, 2012: 104-105.

Discussion and Results

Medan is one of the prime examples of multicultural society in Indonesia. Right now, the Chinese are the most powerful ethnic group in Medan which dominates the city's economic resources. Most of the richest individuals in Medan are Chinese. In general, they are tycoons who dominate and control economic activities from the highest to the lowest levels of society, including the distribution of daily needs and staple foods. 90% of the city's economy is operated by the Chinese, and they also own 90% of all business hubs in Medan. According to an edition of *Swasembada* magazine entitled "*Bintang-bintang Bisnis dari Daerah*" ("Business Stars from the Provinces") (*Swasembada*18, special edition, 31 August 2006), there are some successful Chinese tycoons from North Sumatra Province, such as Albert Kang, Amin Halim, Anton Chen Tjia, Bobby Leong, and Vincent Wijaya. The economic strength of the Chinese in Indonesia is largely because of their excellent business strategies which they have developed ever since they arrived in Medan many years ago. These economic skills are supported by genealogical bonds and business networks which they establish among themselves, referred to as *kongsi*. These bonds and networks are created from mutual relationships based on familial backgrounds, hometown-based associations, the kinship system, culture-based societies, and amicable interactions among members of their community. These forms of networks have been established since their arrival in North Sumatra. Because of the nature of their main occupation as tradesmen and businessmen, they tend to be more economically prosperous than other ethnic groups. Such difference in prosperity leads other people to stigmatize the Chinese people as "economic animals" marked by greed and avarice. As mentioned by one of our informan, local Medanese, public officer in tourism board:

Mereka ke Sumatra Utara, ke Indonesia, khususnya Sumatra Utara, lebih khususnya lagi Medan, menganggap kehidupan mereka datang ke sini bukan untuk bisa berbaur bersama kita, karena mereka itu adalah dia kita sama, tapi datang ke sini hanya mencari bagaimana mendapatkan uang sebanyak-banyak mungkin.

They (Chinese Indonesians) came to North Sumatra, to Indonesia, especially to Medan, considered their life here was not to mingle with us (non-Chinese people) because they and us are the same, but they came here just to enruich themselves by getting as much money from their business (Marbun).

Therefore, it can be argued that the Chinese's powerful economic position in Medan has directly or indirectly become a great obstacle for them to establish amicable interactions with members of other ethnic groups which happen to be less prosperous than they are. By means of economic domination, the Medanese Chinese are then able to control, both conspicuously and inconspicuously, other areas of business, such as housing, education, culinary, and language.

Such circumstance led the Chinese people to orient themselves to their own culture, not to the indigenous cultures. In addition to that, the Chinese, as well as other ethnic groups (except the Malays), still generally consider themselves as migrants. Moreover, these ethnic groups still display various signs of unhealthy competitions, especially in public places, ever since their arrivals in Medan up to this Reform era. Such situation is reflected in segregative

behaviors in various aspects of everyday life, such as housing, education, business, bureaucracy, and politics. Due to the absence of any dominant ethnic group which can serve as a single point of orientation, each citizen is practically free to choose whatever culture they wish to adopt. We found it very explicit in a statement during focus group discussions from three of our informants:

I said, yes. It has been concentrated. (Janto)

I agreed. In Medan it has been concentrated. They (Chinese) live in alley, as I do, and this alley is populated by all Chinese inhabitants. But some of them also mingle and living in rural town is very mingled. Only in uptown they have been concentrated because normally they live in exclusive modern real estates, and I can see that this modern estates was inhabited by almost 75 percent Chinese. (Silvia)

I can put an addition. The housing in Medan is exclusive for Chinese. Concentrated in one particular area. If they can afford a house in town closed to their business activity, they will not come back to village in rural town. (Anthoni)

Such structural gap continues to grow unchallenged; it is no longer a mere political issue, but it has developed into a massive obstacle to the processes of acculturation and integration of the Medanese Chinese. However, various case studies have also demonstrated that trade monopoly is not the only obstacle to the process of assimilation of the Chinese people with the local cultures in Medan. The progress of acculturation of an ethnic group is also determined by whether the ethnic group has an open or closed structure and whether its members are willing to welcome outsiders to their own community or not (Pelly, 2015: 97). Until now, the Medanese Chinese are still considered as a relatively closed community. Besides that, most of them are still reluctant to mingle with other ethnic groups, not only because of religious and cultural differences, but also because they still consider themselves to be superior to other ethnic groups. On top of that, the Medanese Chinese also think that all migrant ethnic groups have the same freedom to choose whatever culture they wish to adopt.

Such characters and attitudes lead to unhealthy relationship between the Chinese people and other ethnic groups in Medan, which holds the potential for igniting conflicts.⁵ Our field observation shows that all non-Chinese ethnic groups in Medan consider their relationships with the local Chinese people as problematic. Therefore, it can be predicted that, when riots break, the Chinese people may be the prime target of hatred and violence. This situation seems to be ignored by both the regional and central governments. This is a potentially dangerous situation, since a massive-scale attack on Chinese businesses may bring national-scale consequences in the form of severe economic disruption.

⁵History records a number of horizontal conflicts between the Chinese Indonesians and the indigenous people. Similar tragedies tend to recur during economic recessions or crises in Indonesia. In fact, the notorious May 1998 riot in Jakarta was triggered by another anti-Chinese riot which had taken place several weeks before in Medan. Segregations and ethnic frictions may recur in Medan because of its large Chinese population, its status as a trade city, and its location near Singapore and Malaysia. The Medanese Chinese are thought to have formed extensive business networks (*kongsis*) with Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese, who are renowned for their economic prowess and business skills.

Based on the above facts and observations, we have identified several factors which may contribute to creating cultural disparities and preventing healthy interaction between the Chinese people and the other ethnic groups in Medan.

The first is the very low degree of communication between the Medanese Chinese and the other ethnic groups in daily life. Most communications only take place at modern or traditional marketplaces. The vocabulary which they use is only limited to practical expressions used in transactions or business. However, these limited communications are further impeded by the fact that common business vocabulary is dominated by Hokkienese Chinese expressions which serve as a lingua franca in the matters of trade and business. As mentioned during focus group discussion:

Usually I speak Konghu with my husband and husband's family. But when hanging out with friends, I speak Hokkienese. (Silvia)

I agreed with that. There was no problem with that. We used to speak Hokkienese every day to communicate. (Anthoni)

The second is the fact that the Chinese people exert dominance over most economic activities in Medan, even though they comprise only 21% of the total population and rank third among the ethnic groups in Medan in terms of population. It is frequently pointed out that the Chinese are hardworking individuals, as well as resourceful entrepreneurs who are capable of providing excellent services for their customers. These characteristics and attitudes are part of their strategies to fight off competition with other ethnic groups. Besides that, they are also brave enough to circumvent government prohibitions and unfavorable regulations, which have become an integral part of their business endeavors. It is true that the New Order era tried to suppress various aspects of the Chinese culture. However, rather than diminishing the power of the Chinese, the government had in fact opened great opportunities for the Chinese people to develop their business by encouraging them to establish relationships with the military or the government, both in secret and in public. The same practice of securing the patronage of the military and the government to protect business interests through bribery and gratuities can still be found among the Chinese people, even during this Reform era. Both conspicuously and inconspicuously, Chinese businessmen serve as the source of illicit income for government officials and politicians. Whether they like it or not, Chinese businessmen have to satisfy those avaricious officials or politicians in return for their patronage and protection. Such relationship is purely based on mutual interests between the patrons and their protégées.

The third is the expansion of Chinese influence into various other areas, such as politics, culture, and social matters to achieve certain purposes. Their expansion to the realm of politics is intended to strengthen their business bases and their relationship with government officials and bureaucrats. Recent data show an increase in the participation of the Medanese Chinese in regional politics, in spite of many negative comments on the actual purpose of their participation in politics after the fall of the New Order regime. Based on our observation, several Chinese figures, both young and old, have entered political parties and become both legislative and executive candidates, as evident in their campaign posters and banners displayed on many streets in Medan during regional elections.

The fourth is the increasing effort to reclaim the Chinese identity as the direct result of their economic successes. This is reflected in the construction of several new worship places (temples, columbaria, and churches) in and around Medan City. Besides that, the Medanese Chinese are eager to make use of every possible means to promote and display Chinese arts and culture which are considered to be more elevated, to be more sophisticated, and to have more significant influence on several other ethnic groups in Medan. In social sphere, they use Chinese cultural celebrations and public holidays (particularly the Chinese New Year, Christmas, and the International New Year) as auspicious opportunities to distribute donations to underprivileged people around temples for the purpose, among others, of improving their social image.

The fifth is the Chinese's negative image due to their perceived exclusivity and reluctance to mingle with members of other ethnic groups. For example, the Chinese people tend to build their houses with high front walls and in luxurious complexes. Such housing pattern is often construed as the Chinese people's segregative attitudes and natural drive towards isolation in the face of the non-Chinese populace. Whether they realize it or not, such attitudes can be interpreted as a patent sign that they are deliberately distancing themselves from other ethnic groups, which creates deeper social gaps and envy among the non-Chinese populace. The houses in elite complexes can only be afforded by upper-class people, while most of the Chinese people, especially who work as businessmen, belong to this group because they generally have a relatively higher income than the other ethnic groups do. Therefore, it is only natural that most of such houses, which happen to be built almost exclusively by Chinese developers, are also purchased by the wealthy members of their own ethnic groups. This situation only strengthens the negative stereotype towards the Chinese people, especially in terms of their interaction with the other ethnic groups in the multicultural Medan. This observation also proves that the atrocities of racial riots and national reform programs have not been able to eliminate the stigma or negative stereotypes attached to the Medanese Chinese by other ethnic groups. In fact, various unfavorable patterns of interaction between the Chinese and the non-Chinese have only strengthened and confirmed the stigma which has so long been associated with the Chinese people.

The sixth is the impression that the Chinese people tend to give unequal treatment to their non-Chinese workers or employees, in the sense that they tend to behave like masters and to consider their subordinates as servants. Such practice is reported to happen in large companies, but even more so in small or medium-sized companies. This condition is perhaps caused by the Chinese's negative view towards the non-Chinese people both in social and business spheres. It is true that, besides being businessmen or entrepreneurs, many Chinese also work as employees and workers at plastic factories, plywood factories, or metal foundries, which are also owned by Chinese entrepreneurs. Those Chinese who work for Chinese factory or company owners tend to have a relatively high salary, as evident in the value of their houses and personal belongings. On the other hand, non-Chinese workers or employees tend to have a lower salary than their Chinese counterparts.

The seventh is the Chinese people's pride or their ancestors' culture which may make them reluctant to assimilate with indigenous cultures. For example, they tend to send their children to private schools and seem to have an aversion to public schools which, in their opinion, are of inferior quality and unsafe for their children.

The eighth is the strong familial relationship and insistence on ethnic and cultural purity. It is very difficult for a Chinese to marry a non-Chinese, and the Chinese who convert

to Islam (become a *muallaf*) will generally be excommunicated by their families. However, Christians are generally more preferable as spouses or in-laws than Moslems. Their insistence on maintaining their ancestral beliefs may be construed as inflexibility in adapting to the local cultures. This might also suggest that they still maintain a condescending attitude towards local cultures. On the other hand, conversions to Christianity, either Catholicism or Protestantism, are more acceptable because those religions still allow their Chinese adherents to practice many of their ancestral rituals and traditions, such as eating pork, drinking wine, burning incense, and building tombs.

Conclusion

Based on the results of our study, we identify ten most observable activities which are associated with the Medanese Chinese. Of the ten activities, three activities conspicuously demonstrate the effort of the Medanese Chinese to achieve dominance over various areas of life in the multicultural Medan: business, housing, and culinary. These three activities have undergone continuous development from the colonial era to this present day. The other seven activities are more inconspicuously performed for the purpose of achieving power over the whole Medan society: education, language, media, name change, kinship relations, and politics. These seven more inconspicuous activities must be regarded as working in tandem with the three more conspicuous ones in order to achieve prominence in Medan. Therefore, based on the facts obtained from our direct observation and field study, we can surmise that socio-cultural interaction between the Chinese and the other ethnic groups in Medan can be sociologically categorized as a meaningless action.

In spite of the fact that much of their freedom was curbed by the New Order regime, the Medanese Chinese were nevertheless able to lead a better life than members of the other ethnic groups in Medan—and even more so upon entering the Reform era—because of their remarkable ability to adapt themselves to the regional socio-political climate which in fact did not really delimit their activities in terms of business, faith, education, and culture. Thanks to their direct control over the city's business and trade, the Medanese Chinese can also extend their influence over other areas of life, such as housing, media, education, kinship relation, and even politics. The Medanese Chinese's recent involvement in politics is an interesting phenomenon in itself since, in the previous eras, politics had merely served as a support for Chinese businesses, but now the Medanese Chinese have their own politicians from various backgrounds to act as their direct representatives in the realm of politics. In spite of being only the third largest ethnic group in Medan in terms of population, their activity matrix shows that the Medanese Chinese are able to extend their influence over many areas of life and become prominent actors in various activities taking place throughout the City of Medan today.

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